

# WHAT ARE YOU WONDERING?

## *A Mentor-Text Lesson on Imagery, Diction & the Poetry of Questions*

Featuring Billy Collins's "Questions About Angels" and Mary Oliver's "The Summer Day" • Grades 7–8

| Grade Band | Time                                                                  | Genre                                  | Standards Focus                                                                                                                     |
|------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 7–8 ELA    | One 50-min. period (condensed) or two 50-min. periods (full workshop) | Poetry and/or prose — student's choice | Imagery & figurative language (RL.7.4/8.4); narrative and poetic craft (W.7.3/8.3); using mentor texts to develop voice (W.7.5/8.5) |

## Overview

This lesson pairs two poems that turn simple wondering into a whole poem: Billy Collins's "Questions About Angels," which uses a cascade of playful, specific questions to make an abstract subject feel funny and physical, and Mary Oliver's "The Summer Day," which starts with patient, close-up natural imagery and builds toward one enormous closing question. Students study how each poet uses imagery, figurative language, and diction to build an idea or a message. Then students will borrow those moves to write an original poem or piece of prose.

## Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Identify and analyze imagery, figurative language, and diction in two mentor poems.
- Compare two different ways a poem can be built around questions: Collins's cumulative, whimsical list versus Oliver's slow build toward a single, weighty question.
- Explain how concrete, sensory detail earns a poem's bigger or more abstract questions — that is, how showing something small and specific first can make a big question feel deserved rather than random.
- Generate original imagery and figurative language modeled on the mentor texts, in a poem or short prose piece of their own design.

## Materials

- A copy of Billy Collins's "Questions About Angels" (available in his collection *Questions About Angels*, or via a licensed poetry database such as Poetry Foundation or Poets.org)
- A copy of Mary Oliver's "The Summer Day" (available in her collection *House of Light*, or via a licensed poetry database such as Poets.org)
- Student mentor-text tracking sheet (Handout A, below)
- Drafting paper or writer's notebooks
- Optional: chart paper or a shared doc for a class "imagery and diction" anchor chart

### **A note on sourcing**

Both poems are still under copyright, so this lesson doesn't reproduce their text. Pull them from a printed collection, your library's licensed database, or a source like Poetry Foundation or Poets.org, and copy according to your school's fair-use guidelines. The two short companion poems later in this document (Dickinson and Rossetti) are old enough to be in the public domain, so their full text is printed right in this lesson.

## Key Vocabulary (mini-lesson, 5–7 min.)

| Term                | Working Definition                                                                                                     | Quick Example                                                                                                                                                       |
|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Imagery             | Language that appeals to the five senses to help a reader picture, hear, feel, taste, or smell something.              | The precise, up-close description of a small creature's jaws and wings in Oliver's poem.                                                                            |
| Figurative language | Language that means something beyond its literal words — metaphor, simile, personification, repetition, juxtaposition. | “Her silence had teeth.”<br>“The hallway swallowed the sound.”                                                                                                      |
| Diction             | A writer's specific word choices, and what those choices reveal about tone, character, or mood.                        | Collins's casual, conversational word choices (“sleeping habits” and “in her stocking feet” make an angel feel like a next-door neighbor instead of a distant idea. |

## Day 1 (50 minutes): Reading Like Writers

### 5 min Warm-Up: The Question Nobody's Asked

Have students free-write in response to this prompt, no wrong answers, no need to finish sentences:

*“Think of something completely ordinary — a vending machine, a doorknob, a Tuesday. Write down one question about it you’ve never actually stopped to ask.”*

Invite two or three students to share their question aloud. This primes the room for a poem that takes an everyday subject seriously enough to interrogate it.

### 15 min Mentor Text Study: Collins's “Questions About Angels”

Read the poem aloud. Collins takes an old, almost silly scholastic question — how many angels can dance on the head of a pin — and runs with it, piling up increasingly specific, deadpan questions about angels' daily lives, bodies, and habits.

As you read, chart student observations under three columns: Imagery, Figurative Language, Diction. Guiding questions:

- Which questions surprised you by being so ordinary or specific, rather than “big” or philosophical?
- How does Collins's conversational, almost joking diction change the way we picture something as lofty as an angel?
- Collins never answers a single question. What effect does that have on the poem's ending?

### 15 min Mentor Text Study: Oliver's “The Summer Day”

Read the poem aloud. Oliver spends most of the poem in extremely close, patient attention to a single grasshopper — the specific movement of its jaws, its eyes, the way it washes its face — before the poem opens outward into a much larger set of questions about attention, mortality, and how a person chooses to live.

The poem is famous for ending on a question about “*your one wild and precious life*” — a phrase widely quoted well beyond the poem itself.

- How does the close, careful imagery of the grasshopper earn the poem's right to ask something so much bigger at the end?
- What's the difference between “paying attention” as Oliver describes it and simply looking at something?
- Compare the diction here to Collins's: is it playful? Hushed? Urgent? How does the diction (Oliver's choice of words) create that tone?

**What does it mean to “earn” a question?**

Share this with students directly: You can't just ask a big question out of nowhere — you have to show the reader something small and real first, so the big question feels like it belongs. Oliver spends almost the whole poem in close, specific attention to one grasshopper before she ever asks anything huge. That careful noticing is like collateral: it buys her the right to ask something enormous at the end. If she'd opened with the big question and skipped the grasshopper, it would feel too big, too generic, dropped in from nowhere. The small, concrete detail makes the big question “land” instead of feeling preachy or tacked on.

## 10 min Compare & Contrast

Discuss as a class or in small groups:

- Collins builds a poem out of many small, playful questions; Oliver builds toward one enormous question. What does each structure allow the poet to do?
- Which poem's imagery is more grounded in the everyday, physical world — and does that surprise you, given that one poem is about angels and the other is about a summer day?
- Which poem's voice feels closer to your own voice? Which would be more fun to imitate? Which would be more challenging?

## 5 min Introduce the Writing Task & Distribute Handout A

Explain the choices for tomorrow's (or the second half of today's) writing:

1. A Collins-style question poem — pick an ordinary or overlooked subject and pile up specific, playful, ungrounded questions about it. No answers required.
2. An Oliver-style poem or prose piece — begin with slow, close, sensory attention to one small living thing, then widen out to one bigger question about life, time, or attention.
3. A short piece of image-rich prose (a paragraph or two) inspired by either poem's imagery and figurative language, question-driven or not.

For homework or the last few minutes of class, students begin filling in Handout A.

## Handout A — Mentor Text Tracking Sheet

Students don't need to copy full lines from the mentor texts word-for-word. A short paraphrase or a few words is plenty — the goal is to name the technique, not transcribe the poem.

| Mentor Text                                                   | What I noticed (image, comparison, or word choice) | The technique it's using | A move I want to try |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|
| Collins, “Questions About Angels”                             |                                                    |                          |                      |
| Oliver, “The Summer Day”                                      |                                                    |                          |                      |
| Optional companion poem (Dickinson, Rossetti, or Silverstein) |                                                    |                          |                      |

## Day 2 (50 minutes): Drafting & Sharing

If you're teaching this as a single 50-minute period, trim each Day 1 discussion section by about 5 minutes and move straight into a 15-minute draft, replacing the peer feedback round below with a quick partner share.

## 5 min Warm-Up: Revisit the Anchor Chart

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Post the Imagery / Figurative Language / Diction chart from Day 1 where students can see it while they write. Quickly review Handout A observations as a class.

## 25 min Independent Drafting

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Students choose one of the three options from Day 1 and draft. Circulate and confer. Sentence starters for students who feel stuck:

- “Does a \_\_\_ ever wonder about \_\_\_? Does it ever \_\_\_?” (a Collins-style opening)
- Start by describing one small, real detail as closely as you can — the way a wing moves, the way light lands on something — before you let yourself ask a bigger question (an Oliver-style opening).
- “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with \_\_\_?” — borrow Oliver’s closing structure but fill in your own subject.

## 10 min Peer Feedback

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In pairs, students exchange drafts and respond using the mentor-text lens rather than generic praise. Sentence starters:

- “The image that surprised me most was \_\_\_ because \_\_\_.”
- “This line reminds me of [Collins / Oliver] because \_\_\_.”
- “I wonder what would happen if you pushed this comparison, or this question, even further \_\_\_.”

## 10 min Revision & Sharing

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Students revise one line or image based on feedback, then share (aloud, in small groups, or via a gallery walk of printed drafts). Close by asking: “What’s one question your poem or prose leaves unanswered on purpose?”

## Modeled Student Examples (for teacher reference)

These are original examples, written to model the two options — not excerpts from Collins or Oliver — that you can read aloud if students want one more model before drafting.

### *Collins-style model:*

*Do vending machines get lonely at 2 a.m.,  
humming to no one in an empty hallway,  
and do they hope, every time footsteps pass, that this is finally someone hungry?*

### *Oliver-style model:*

*The moth on the porch light doesn't know it's dying,  
only that the light is warm and the night is not,  
and isn't that most of what any of us know for certain — the warmth, and the reaching toward it?*

## Optional Companion Poems: More “Question Poems”

These next few poems are old enough to be in the public domain, so their full text is included here — ready to hand out or project without any additional sourcing — plus one more copyrighted option worth sourcing separately.

### **I'm Nobody! Who Are You?**

*by Emily Dickinson (1891)*

*I'm Nobody! Who are you?  
Are you — Nobody — too?  
Then there's a pair of us!  
Don't tell! they'd advertise — you know!*

*How dreary — to be — Somebody!  
How public — like a Frog —  
To tell one's name — the livelong June —  
To an admiring Bog!*

### **Who Has Seen the Wind?**

*by Christina Rossetti (1872)*

*Who has seen the wind?  
Neither I nor you:  
But when the leaves hang trembling,  
The wind is passing through.*

*Who has seen the wind?  
Neither you nor I:  
But when the trees bow down their heads,  
The wind is passing through.*

### **Color (“What Is Pink?”)**

*by Christina Rossetti (1872)*

*What is pink? a rose is pink  
By the fountain's brink.  
What is red? a poppy's red  
In its barley bed.  
What is blue? the sky is blue  
Where the clouds float thro'.  
What is white? a swan is white  
Sailing in the light.  
What is yellow? pears are yellow,  
Rich and ripe and mellow.  
What is green? the grass is green,  
With small flowers between.  
What is violet? clouds are violet  
In the summer twilight.  
What is orange? why, an orange,  
Just an orange!*

Discussion prompt for any of these three poems: how does a very short, simple question (“Who are you?”, “Who has seen the wind?”, “What is pink?”) let the poet explore something bigger — identity, the invisible, or the nature of color itself — without ever needing a big, complicated vocabulary? “Color” is also a nice one to imitate directly: its call-and-response pattern (question, then one vivid image as the answer) is an easy structure for students to borrow, extend to new colors, or flip into something deadpan or ironic with a Collins-style twist — the poem already ends on one (“What is orange? Why, an orange. Just an orange!”).

Another fun, playful option for this age group is Shel Silverstein's poem “Whatif,” from *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. It lists a child's night-time worries entirely as an escalating, sing-song string of questions — basically Collins's cumulative-question structure aimed at bedtime anxiety instead of angels, which tends to land well with this age group. It's still under copyright, so source it from the collection or a licensed database, but it pairs especially well with Collins's list-building style and could easily stand in for (or alongside) “Questions About Angels” as a mentor text on Day 1.

## **Quick-Score Rubric (10 points)**

| Criteria                              | Meets (full credit)                                                                              | Approaching (partial credit)                                                     |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Imagery (4 pts)                       | Uses specific, sensory imagery that lets the reader see, hear, or feel something precisely.      | Imagery present but general or vague (“it was pretty,” “the room was nice”).     |
| Figurative language / diction (3 pts) | Includes at least one deliberate comparison or carefully chosen word that shapes tone.           | Figurative language is present but underdeveloped, or word choices feel generic. |
| Mentor text connection (3 pts)        | Clear, identifiable connection to a technique from Collins or Oliver (structure, tone, or move). | Loose or unstated connection to the mentor texts.                                |

## Differentiation & Extensions

- Extra scaffold: Give hesitant writers a fill-in-the-blank frame (“Does \_\_\_\_ ever \_\_\_\_? And when \_\_\_\_, does it \_\_\_\_?”) to build confidence before they write freely.
- Extension: Ask advanced students to write two short poems on the same subject — one in Collins's playful, list-driven style and one in Oliver's slow, image-to-question style — then reflect on how structure changed the poem's meaning.
- Cross-curricular tie-in: Pair this lesson with a science unit by having students write a Collins-style question poem about an animal, or an Oliver-style poem about a single moment of close observation in nature.
- Publishing idea: Compile the class's question poems into a shared classroom anthology, arranged so playful poems and quiet poems sit side by side, echoing the contrast between Collins and Oliver.